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Joint written statement* submitted by the Maarij Foundation for Peace and Development, Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Statement on Poverty

Maarij Foundation for Peace and Development and the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD) welcome this opportunity to address the Human Rights Council on the continuing efforts to address the serious issue of global poverty, particularly within the context of the post-2015 development agenda.

This agenda, as we all know, will succeed the eight ambitious UN Millennium Development Goals for 2015, which ranged from environmental sustainability, universal primary education, the halving of extreme poverty to a greater empowerment of women. These goals, despite a number of shortfalls, resulted in invaluable progress on a number of fronts, and ultimately clarified the interdependencies between various aspects of development, poverty, human rights, and security.

It is clear today that security and economic growth, are mutually reinforcing. It is no coincidence that 39 of the 49 Least Developed Countries are suffering through conflict or post-conflict situations. But, on the other hand, we find that the effects of improvements in one sector can be limited by another. While we have seen a huge growth of youth educated to the high school level and beyond, continuing unemployment, due in part to the global financial crisis, has left a majority of this population marginalized. Thus, moving forward with effective development post-2015 requires us to critically examine how our systems, problems, and actors have evolved in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. And this especially applies to the issue of poverty.

One of the major misconceptions regarding poverty that has plagued international development for about half a century, is that it is simply a condition where an individual or group lacks financial means and, thus, by extension the solution could be found in some figure of development aid. Such a gross oversimplification obviously ignores the multidimensional factors that contribute to what is in fact a system of disempowerment that we call poverty. Warfare, lack of education, ethnic discrimination, environmental degradation and exploitation inevitably prevent social mobility while reinforcing power inequalities. Any comprehensive approach to poverty will include regionally appropriate "top-down" policy-strategies that address the necessary restructuring of power and wealth, as well as "bottom-up" strategies that focus on increased empowerment, participation, and agency.

This brings us back to building on the MDG 8 with strategies that take into account the evolution of poverty and its root causes in a post-2015 world. One of the major shortfalls of the MDG 8 was an overall failure to address accountability and governance in developing states. It is clear that while moving forward, it is of utmost importance that our "top down" strategy not only makes better use of foreign aid, but also tackles what is draining funds from developing countries.

The reality is that the world we live in today is dominated by corporations that not only earn more money but also wield more power and influence than many developing countries. Corporate exploitation is by no means a new phenomenon, but it's reprehensible that, in 2015, billions of dollars in profits continue to be made at the expense of those with nothing. African nations have long suffered from the exploitation of natural resources and appropriations of land by foreign businesses, which cost countries twice as much as total development aid to the continent annually. Continued imports by corporations of conflict minerals and illicitly acquired resources not only destabilizes the region, but also denies

local citizens the opportunity to capitalize on their own wealth. Tackling these injustices requires both stronger local governance to combat illicit trade flows and establish firm property rights, as well as binding transparency standards on global supply chains.

Another example of corporate exploitation contributing to poverty can be found with the tobacco industry. With the sharp decline in use of tobacco products in the developed world, the tobacco industry has focused on driving consumption in low and middle income countries by targeting public health taxes, deliberately marketing to women and youth, and exploiting bilateral and multilateral trade agreements to combat health packaging laws with expensive litigation. Most recently, the industry has challenged policies through expensive investor state dispute settlement mechanisms, arguing that unfavourable regulations violate the brand's intellectual property rights. These suits have intimidated low-income countries in Africa, Southeast Asia and South America and deterred them from pursuing tobacco control legislation.

Consequently, smoking in developing countries has steadily increased at roughly 3.5% percent annually, currently reaching over 80% of the global market share. The economic burden to low income smokers is immediate, and most will not be able to cover the cost of the long-term health effects that will plague them throughout their lives. In addition to pushing for stronger implementation of the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, the post-2015 development agenda must address the shifting agenda for global health and hold tobacco and pharmaceutical industries accountable for the role that they play.

It is clear that when developing countries lag several decades behind wealthier countries in the legislation of sound, scientifically based health policies—such as warning labels on cigarette packages—these populations are further disempowered, disadvantaged and susceptible to conditions of poverty.

This focus on initiatives for global health also moves past "top-down" strategies, and into "bottom-up" strategies that seek to offer agency and participation directly to socially, economically, and politically marginalized communities. Taking a human rights based approach to health, where every individual, regardless of their socio-economic status, has a guaranteed right to quality physical and mental health services, is a prerequisite for any sustainable social and economic development.

There is no denying that a population with stronger physical and mental capabilities will not only produce a more productive and capable workforce, but also to less economic resources being wasted on easily preventable complications. The original MDG 8 made considerable progress on child mortality, which was linked to direct economic growth, and now we must continue to focus on the economic effects of chronic under nutrition and potentially catastrophic infectious diseases.

The overall goal of these improved "bottom-up" approaches is to empower vulnerable communities with the tools they need to develop their own economic systems. The World Bank has played and will continue to play a vital role in bridging financing gaps for infrastructure, education, energy and water security in the coming years. They have clearly demonstrated a drive for sustainable solutions that move past mere donor-aid, and instead work to empower local actors by strengthening local financial systems and property rights. This extends to the inclusion of local actors in all decision-making processes, and the strengthening of local civil society to enhance political efficacy and improved governance.

In the coming months, the entire international community has a role to play in determining appropriate regional "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches for the post-2015 agenda. An NGO like GNRD, for example, takes both approaches. We advise the African Union Commission on developing plans for social protection and raises awareness of issues and responsibilities to policy makers; at the same time, we work with vulnerable communities in the Middle East and Northern Africa to help protect basic rights and health services.

In closing, I think it bears repeating that in 2015, the interdependencies between social development, security, and poverty have never been stronger, and what we have at stake if we don't fix this crisis has never been higher. We simply will not solve many of today's global crises without making significant advancements in social development and the provision of viable economic opportunities. For example, there is no denying that the shocking regularity of drowning tragedies in the Mediterranean and the proliferation of deadly migration routes are inextricably linked to poverty and stability in the Middle East and North African region.

The number of migrants who risked their lives to sail to Europe rose from 70,000 in 2011 to 220,000 in 2014; and hundreds of thousands more are working years in labour camps to try to earn the exorbitant fees smugglers charge for a one-way ticket. The only long-term solution to this problem is through sustainable development strategies that tackle the roots of poverty and inequality in the region.

We can't pretend there is a simple solution to eradicating poverty, but a comprehensive post-2015 agenda requires us to remain cognizant of the evolving challenges in today's world, as well as the shifting dynamics and interdependencies between problems and actors.